



Gender stereotypes and youth voices in Morocco: masculinity, law, and social change

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This reform process follows years of feminist advocacy and growing debate over the relationship between law, religion, and gender equality. It represents a historic moment to reshape Morocco's legal framework and cultural narratives on gender, while also expanding public participation. Yet youth remain notably absent from these debates, despite the 2011 Constitution's guarantee of their right to political, social, and cultural influence.¹

This study addresses that gap by examining Moroccan youth attitudes towards gender stereotypes and gender equality, based on interviews and focus groups with 60 participants. While initially focused on gender stereotypes in general, many male participants voiced stronger critique of gender stereotypes than female participants, particularly those that restricted their own emotional expression and imposed financial pressures. Their ambivalence towards reform often reflected economic anxiety and perceived loss of status rather than outright opposition to equality. These findings highlight how constructions of masculinity, with their emotional and economic burdens, could be a key axis of Morocco's gender politics. At a time of potential legislative transformation, incorporating youth perspectives is essential to ensuring reforms reflect the aspirations of the next generation and engage masculinity as a dynamic and contested space.

Research questions

Gender stereotypes reflect expectations about social groups and are often constructed in binary pairs (Ellemers 2018). This study examines which stereotypes Moroccan youth are aware of, how they perceive their effects, and how these views relate to attitudes towards gender equality and justice. It also considers how stereotypes and daily interactions may reinforce structural inequalities, including in legislation. For this research, 'youth' refers to those aged 18–30, a range that captures both the onset of legal adulthood and the extended transition to independence common in Morocco. While international bodies often define youth by age (e.g. the UN's 15–24 category), scholars emphasise that youth is not merely a biological stage, but a socially constructed, politically charged category, with boundaries evolving according to socio-cultural contexts (Arnett 2006).

In Morocco, 'youth' is frequently invoked in policy discourse yet rarely disaggregated by gender, class, or region, obscuring significant differences (Bennani-Chraïbi and Farag 2007; Desrues 2012). Many young people experience 'waithood', a prolonged transition marked by delayed marriage, unstable employment, and limited autonomy, shaped further by class, geography, and gender (Dhillon and Yousef 2009). For example, rural youth may leave school early due to economic pressures, while urban middle-class youth navigate tensions between globalised gender values and local norms (Bourqia 2023). These social conditions deeply influence how young people relate to questions of gender and reform. Moreover, feminist scholars

This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring how young Moroccans experience gender roles, stereotypes, and reform, and how their perspectives align, or clash, with formal legal frameworks and customary practices, as a way to better understand the generational dynamics at play and the potential for youth to serve as agents of change in accelerating progress towards genuine gender equality.

Moroccan youth and gender norms

Literature on Moroccan youth reveals both transformation and continuity. Educated, urban, and digitally connected youth are more likely to challenge stereotypes and advocate for egalitarian relationships (Chahbane and Alaoui 2023; El Kandoussi 2023). Others, however, exhibit greater adherence to conservative cultural norms and religious interpretations that reinforce patriarchal power structures (Niddazi and Hourmat Allah 2023). Literature also sheds light on the complex interplay of factors that shape Moroccan youth's attitudes, such as geography, socioeconomic status, educational attainment, and exposure to globalisation (El Idrissi, Bouzar, and Ghourdou 2024; Therrien and Phipps 2023).

Survey data illustrates these contradictions: while only 12% of youth believe higher education is more important for men, 31% consider men better suited to politics, and 38% think husbands should have the final say in families (Arab Barometer 2023). This contradiction reflects an ongoing negotiation between modernising forces and enduring patriarchal values. Religion also plays a role, with some youth adopting inclusive interpretations, while others reinforce conservative hierarchies (Chafai 2021). Overall, urban youth, particularly those with access to higher education and exposure to global media, tend to exhibit more progressive views (Camozzi et al. 2018). However, this pattern is not absolute; conservative currents, including the growing 'Red Pill' trend among educated young men, complicate this picture.²

Gender stereotypes and their broader effects

Stereotypes remain pervasive, constraining women's roles in family, work, and politics (Sadiqi 2011). Narratives emphasise women as caregivers, tying their worth to domesticity and limiting education and careers (Díaz and Sellami 2014). Other stereotypes depict women as intellectually or physically inferior, justifying their exclusion from leadership and reinforcing male dominance (Rassam 1980). Additionally, cultural anxieties surrounding female sexuality and honour have justified social restrictions on women's mobility, dress, and behaviour. Stereotypes linking women's moral worth to chastity have contributed to gender-based violence, victim-blaming, and state or familial control over women's bodies (Chafai 2021; Conway-Long 2002; Debbagh 2012; El Ghazouani 2015; Pourmehdi 2015).

of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 60 Moroccan youth (ages 18–30), sampled to capture diversity across gender, socioeconomic status, geography, education, and marital status. The aim was not full representation, but inclusion of often-excluded perspectives, such as unemployed men, rural women, and those with limited education.

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling via youth organisations, local associations, and personal networks. Interviews were conducted in *darija* (Moroccan Arabic) and *tachelhit* (Amazigh), then transcribed and translated into English. The research team included the author, trained assistants from the Moroccan Youth Policy Center, and a co-researcher in the field. Transcripts were thematically coded using inductive analysis, allowing themes to emerge from participants’ narratives rather than from predefined assumptions.

Special efforts were made to reach underrepresented groups. Married women were engaged through residential focus groups or in collaboration with women’s associations. Rural youth, particularly from Al Haouz and Drâa-Tafilalet, were accessed through university networks and the author’s prior teaching ties in the region. Interviews were also arranged in workplaces to accommodate participants with limited availability.

Breakdown of participants

In total, 60 Moroccan youth participated in the research, and a total of 30 individual interviews and 8 focus groups were carried out. The following table represents the demographic characteristics of participants.

Demographics table

Variable	Category	Count (<i>n</i> = 60)
Gender	Male	30
	Female	30
Geographic Origin	Urban	31
	Rural	29
Region	Fès-Meknès	14
	Drâa-Tafilalet	12
	Marrakech-Safi	11
	Souss-Massa	7
	Casablanca-Settat	6
	Béni Mellal-Khénifra	6
	L’Oriental	2
	Migrant	2
	Primary School	9
Highest education level completed	Middle School	7
	Secondary School	28
	Bachelors	9
Employment	Masters	7
	Employed	19
	Unemployed	15
	Student	26

(Continued)

sample of 60 youth, drawn largely from university backgrounds, underrepresents married and divorced participants. Despite these limitations, the study highlights diverse perspectives, especially from marginalised groups, and points to the need for broader, more inclusive research in future work on Moroccan youth and gender.

Results: youth interviews

This study adopts an interpretive, feminist qualitative approach that resists reductionist explanations, treating Moroccan youths' views on gender not as products of single variables like education, gender, or geography, but as shaped by dynamic interactions of personal histories, structural constraints, and social environments.

Guide to interview codes

Interviews were coded to retain the anonymity of participants and were assigned a letter code based on location, and number code based on participant number at each location.

- coded interviews represent Casablanca
- coded interviews represent Marrakech
- coded interviews represent Fes
- coded interviews represent Demnat
- coded interviews represent Ouled Teima

Deeply entrenched gender expectations

Across all locations, participants agreed that Moroccan society imposes rigid gender roles: men are expected to be breadwinners, decision-makers, and authority figures, while women are confined largely to domestic responsibilities and caregiving. These expectations were described as deeply entrenched and enforced through cultural traditions and patriarchal norms. When asked what defines a 'real man', youth consistently emphasised strength, respect, and financial provision, with men expected to suppress emotions and project authority. As C_01, an 18-year-old male bachelor's student from Casablanca, explained: *'a real man is someone who is strong, demanding, and has a good job and status'*. Similarly, M_03, a 19-year-old female from rural Al Haouz studying in Marrakech, noted: *'boys need to be strong... he's responsible for every hard job, and if he says something, you have to do it'*. Such statements reflect a narrow and pervasive ideal of masculinity that leaves little space for vulnerability.

as their potential to contribute beyond the domestic sphere. M_07, a 19-year-old male from the rural Southeast who left school after primary level, reflected: *'if the woman works, I'd stay home and take care of the house until she comes. I know how to cook and do the chores'*. While framed within domestic roles, this view recognises the possibility of shared responsibilities.

Overall, age appeared to shape attitudes. There was a twelve-year age difference between the youngest and oldest participants: younger participants were more open to equality in relationships, while older participants expressed greater concern about disrupting patriarchal hierarchies. As one 18-year-old male student in Casablanca explained: *'if they are not equal, there is always someone higher and someone lower ... like the master and the slave'*. These tensions highlight how Moroccan youth negotiate between entrenched gender norms and emerging egalitarian values, with change occurring unevenly and often contentiously.

Gender stereotypes as positive or negative influences on youths' lives

Participants held mixed views on whether gender stereotypes harmed or helped their lives. Notably, men were more critical of stereotypes, particularly those restricting their emotional expression, an unexpected finding given that most research in Morocco and the wider MENA region highlights stereotypes' negative impact on women. Both male and female participants agreed that discouraging men from showing vulnerability was harmful. As C_02, a 20-year-old female student from Casablanca, observed: *'my cousin was taught he shouldn't cry ... it's very harmful. He'll grow up bottling things up until it breaks at some point'*. She later went on to say that we should *'get rid of all those internalized beliefs that are limiting them [men] internalized anger, internalized sadness. Which will not let them flourish in their life'*. Similarly, M_03, a 19-year-old female from rural Al Haouz, explained: *'they can cry. They are all human. If he has a hard time, it's normal'*.

Male participants also described societal pressures to do, or not do, certain things to be considered 'a man', including being 'harsh' and in control, even when this conflicted with their personalities. Several participants noted that women themselves often reinforced these expectations. As D_03, a 25-year-old rural woman, explained, *'women love hearing 'no' from their man even if they still do whatever they want'*. Similarly, M_03, a 19-year-old female from rural Al Haouz, reflected that if a man is consistently kind or accommodating, such as allowing his partner to spend time with male friends, others will say he is 'like a girl' and 'not a man'. These judgments, she added, can make men feel ashamed even when they are happy in their relationships.

Some men wished to depart from these rigid roles but felt constrained by social pressures. For example, a few expressed interest in being stay-at-home

women in Moroccan society. These rigid norms dictate appropriate conduct, appearance, and interactions, and deviations from these prescribed roles are often met with criticism, labelling, and even harassment.

Taken together, these accounts illustrate how men and women alike felt confined by rigid gender expectations: men by the obligation to provide, women by the pressures of modesty and domesticity, which contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequalities and the suppression of individual expression and autonomy. While there are glimpses of resistance and challenges to these rigid norms, the interviews reveal the deeply entrenched nature of social judgments and expectations surrounding gender roles in Moroccan society. Resisting these restrictive norms and embracing a more inclusive and fluid understanding of gender expression remains an ongoing challenge.

Gender norms that stick

Childbirth emerged as a boundary marker where otherwise shifting gender norms broke down. While many participants supported women's right to work, nearly all reverted to the expectation that mothers should stay home in the early years of childcare. This norm cut across gender, class, and geography, underscoring how deeply entrenched patriarchal family models remain.

C_05, a 24-year-old PhD student in Casablanca, explained, *'I don't want her [his future wife] to stay home. I prefer that she does something'*, but qualified, *'that's the tricky thing, because especially in the early stage, someone has to take care of them'*. Similarly, M_01, a 20-year-old urban student in Marrakech, argued, *'it's better for the mother to stay at home during the early years of childhood'*. For M_02, a 20-year-old from rural Al Haouz, the expectation was even more rigid: after childbirth, a woman should rest while the man works, since it would be 'less manly' for a husband to take on that role.

Others framed maternal caregiving as a moral obligation. M_07, a 19-year-old from the rural Southeast, insisted, *'if there are kids, yes, it's better for her to stay at home and take care of them... the kids come first of course'*. A Casablanca focus group participant summarised the prevailing view: *'I don't mind my wife working, but raising children comes first'*.

Taken together, these accounts reveal how childbirth functions as a cultural tipping point: a moment when egalitarian ideals give way to more traditional expectations. In practice, motherhood remains a key site where patriarchal divisions of labour persist, even among youth otherwise supportive of gender equality.

Gender equality or gender justice?

When asked directly, most participants across demographics expressed support for 'gender equality'. Even some of the most conservative voices,

Some participants even warned that full equality would harm women. D_07, a 30-year-old rural man, declared, *'equality is against women, it will hurt them more than benefit them'*, while M_01, a 20-year-old urban student, argued that women should avoid physically demanding jobs like lifting gas bottles: *'Respectfully to their femininity, they shouldn't go for such jobs ... they shouldn't suffer that way'*.

In short, while 'gender equality' was widely endorsed in principle, youth across backgrounds interpreted it as gender justice or complementarity; each sex fulfilling distinct roles with mutual respect, but not sameness. However, crucially, they believed these roles had equal value and should command equal respect. Egalitarian ideals thus remained bounded by patriarchal logics of difference, tradition, and naturalised gender roles.

Youth and the topic of women's rights

Across the sample, both male and female participants broadly supported granting women more rights, often framing this as mutually beneficial. As M_03, a 19-year-old woman from rural Al Haouz now studying in Marrakech, put it: *'when women have all their rights, it's good for her. And it's good for men'*. Similarly, C_01, an 18-year-old urban male student, believed it *'creates better relations because now men and women are considered equal in all domains'*.

Yet, support was not always grounded in women's intrinsic entitlement to rights. Instead, men often justified women's empowerment in relation to supporting men in their role as provider and household head. F_01, a Nigerian male student in Morocco, argued that expanding women's rights *'helps the role of men in society, the protectors and all of that ... it eases that pressure on men'*. This reflects a logic of complementarity, where women's rights are valued insofar as they strengthen men's patriarchal role.

Resistance was present, particularly among more conservative participants. OT_2, a 27-year-old married rural woman, insisted: *'men should always be in charge ... giving women an equal say in marriage will create problems'*. Others expressed ambivalence or anxiety rather than outright rejection. For instance, C_01, the same 18-year-old urban male, acknowledged: *'I don't believe that just because women are getting more, men are getting less. But ... it feels like you are losing, like you are losing a race'*. Such comments illustrate how women's gains can be perceived as men's losses, revealing the zero-sum framing of rights within patriarchal systems.

Notably, male objections often stemmed less from ideology than from economic insecurity. Participants worried that women accessing well-paid jobs or equal inheritance would intensify pressures on men already struggling to uphold their provider role. In this sense, resistance to women's rights was

women as distinct but interdependent, with different roles that should command equal respect. Reform strategies that align with these local understandings are more likely to gain traction than those that impose external egalitarian models.

Ultimately, meaningful inclusion of youth voices in the reform process is vital. Their perspectives illuminate how shifting masculinities, economic precarity, and enduring patriarchal norms intersect to shape gender politics in contemporary Morocco. Addressing these complexities head-on can help ensure that legal reforms translate into genuine social transformation.

Notes

1. For example, the government has initiated steps towards establishing a youth council of Morocco, *Conseil consultatif de la jeunesse et de l'action associative* (CCJAA), as prescribed by law 89.15 of 2017. The council is intended to be a consultative entity in the areas of protection of youth and promotion of associative life but has not been activated. Even before functioning, the council is under critique for being exclusive (see the media report, <https://leseco.ma/maroc/conseil-consultatif-de-la-jeunesse-vivement-lactivation.html>).
2. See HESPRESS (2023). 'Recent study analyses the behavior of Moroccan "Red Pillers", unveils shocking revelations'.
3. It is important to stress that this research does not aim to present a simple 'urban = progressive' versus 'rural = conservative' binary. While rural participants often expressed more conservative views than their urban counterparts, these must be understood in context, shaped by factors such as limited access to education, media, and public discourse. At the same time, urban participants did not uniformly hold progressive views, with some strongly endorsing traditional perspectives. Rather than attributing attitudes to geography alone, the findings suggest that class position and education intersect with rurality in shaping worldviews and access to alternative discourses. The analysis therefore avoids framing rural and urban perspectives as oppositional, instead highlighting how local context and opportunity structures influence gendered attitudes.

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